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## Police and thieves pillage Helmand

By Gareth Porter  
7/30/2009

WASHINGTON - The strategy of the major United States and [British military](#) offensive in Afghanistan's Helmand province aimed at wresting it from the Taliban is based on bringing back Afghan army and police to maintain permanent control of the population, so the foreign forces can move on to another insurgent stronghold.

But that strategy poses an acute problem: the police in the province, who are linked to the local warlord, have committed systematic abuses against the population, including the abduction and rape of pre-teen boys, according to village elders who met with British officers.

Anger over those police abuses runs so high that the elders in Babaji just north of Laskgar Gah warned the British that they would support the Taliban to get rid of them if the national police were allowed to return to the area, according to a July 12 report by Reuters correspondent Peter Graff.

Associated Press reporters Jason Straziuso and David Guttenfelder, who accompanied US troops in northern Helmand, reported on July 13 that villagers in Aynak were equally angry about police depredations. Within hours of the arrival of US troops in the village, they wrote, bands of villagers began complaining the local police force was "a bigger problem than the Taliban".

The brutality of the Afghan police toward the civilian population in Helmand was no surprise to [ambassador](#) Ron Neumann, who was the US envoy in Afghanistan from 2005 to 2007. Such abuses, including rape of pre-teen boys, "are part of the larger problem of repression and oppression" in Afghanistan, Neumann told Inter Press Service (IPS).

Neumann said the problem of police abuses against the population can be traced to the creation of the national police after the overthrow of the Taliban regime in late 2001. The Afghan police were not created afresh by US and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces, Neumann recalls but were "constituted from the forces that were then

fighting the Taliban".

In Helmand province, the police came from the militia of the local warlord, former mujahideen commander Sher Mohammed Akhonzadeh, a member of the Alizai tribe, who had dominated the province before the Taliban took control of the Pashtun south in 1994. Akhonzada became the [governor](#) of Helmand province in 2002.

The rivals of the Alizai in Helmand are members the Ishaqzai tribe, who become influential in the province during the Taliban period, as noted by Antonio Giustozzi in his book *Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop*, published this year.

The restoration of Akhonzada to power gave the warlord and his militia the opportunity to use the police to take revenge on their Ishaqzai rivals. If you are the police under these circumstances, Neumann said, "you take the people's land, their women, you steal from them - it's all part of one package".

The predatory rule of Akhonzada and his militias was interrupted for a second time when the Taliban took control of large areas of the province in 2008.

The Scotsman's Jerome Starkey quoted a shopkeeper in the city of Lashkar Gah, not far from the headquarters of the British and [US Marine](#) contingents in northern Helmand on July 16 as saying that the Taliban "were good for the welfare of ordinary Afghans, for poor people like us". The reason, he explained, was that, "[i]n Taliban times, there was punishment for criminals".

The British and US forces in Helmand province appear to be unprepared to deal with the popular anger over police abuses. The spokesman for the US 2nd Marine Expeditionary Brigade, Captain William Pelletier, told IPS in an e-mail that he had "no information about the allegations of misconduct" by police reported to British officers, despite the fact that the Marine brigade's headquarters in Helmand are right next to those of the British Task Force Helmand.

Pelletier had not responded as of Wednesday to an IPS query about popular allegations to US officers of police abuses in the US area of responsibility in Helmand.

The spokesman for the British Task Force Helmand, Lieutenant Colonel Nick Richardson, asked in an interview with IPS about the grievances voiced by village elders to British officers, said, "We are aware of those."

He refused to specify what grievances against the police had been aired to the British, but said, "If there is any allegation, it will be dealt with by the appropriate authorities." That meant the "the chain of command of the Afghan national police", Richardson explained.

But the Afghan national police command has little real power over the police in Helmand province. As of mid-2007 the national police command controlled the appointments of only four of the 13 districts in Helmand province, according to an International Crisis Group study in August 2007. The remaining nine were evidently controlled locally - meaning that the Akhonzada was able to keep his own men in position in most of the districts.

Although the IGC study did not specify which districts were not controlled by the national

police command, the districts which are the objects of the US-British military operation in Helmand are especially sensitive because they include the main opium poppy fields in the province.

Akhundzada maintains his power in Helmand in part because of a firm political alliance with [President Hamid Karzai](#).

Karzai was forced by British pressure to remove Akhundzada from office in January 2006, after a British-trained counter-narcotics team found nearly 10 tonnes of heroin in the warlord's basement.

But Karzai also ensured that Akhundzada retained his full power in Helmand, forcing Akhundzada's replacement as governor, Mohammad Daud, to accept the warlord's brother Amir Mohammed, as his deputy. That signaled that Akhundzada was effectively still in control.

Then Karzai began forming what would eventually be called "Afghanistan National Auxiliary Police", the new recruits for which came straight out of Akhundzada's 500-man private army and those of other warlords.

By the end of 2006, Karzai had removed Daud, a favorite of the British, because he was free of links with the drug lords. Karzai replaced him with an aged and infirm official who was less likely to refuse to cooperate with Akhundzada.

As recently as September 2008, Karzai was hinting to Afghan members of parliament that he would have reinstated Akhundzada had it not been for [British Prime Minister](#) Gordon Brown's threat to withdraw British troops from Helmand if he did.

Helmand province is the epicenter of the Afghan drug industry, which generates an annual income for those who manage it estimated by the [United Nations](#) Office on Drugs and Crime at US\$3 billion. Much of that income is siphoned off by the local warlords like Akhundzada who protect the drug lords' operations.

Although poppy fields in Helmand were supposed to have been eradicated under official government policy, large areas of poppy fields owned by wealthy farmers were untouched, as reported last April by the Telegraph.

Ambassador Neumann told IPS he believes the police should be excluded from security responsibilities in the province. It is not clear, however, whether British and US forces in Helmand will prevent the return of the very police who committed crimes against the population in the province.

The US solution appears to be more training. United States troops in Aynak sent the police stationed in the local police headquarters out of the province for several weeks of training, replacing them with a unit they had brought with them, according to an Associated Press report.

But British spokesman Richardson said that both the Afghan [military](#) and police, who had been absent from the area before the British offensive in Northern Helmand, "are returning to the area bit by bit".